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The invasion of Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's most expensive and direct involvement in a Third World conflict and many reasons have been suggested for it. The Soviets claim they were invited because of outside influence, others believe the invasion shows the influence of a more militant Soviet leadership, yet others point to the projected Soviet oil shortage or to the prevention of Islamic fervor from spreading to Soviet Muslims. More likely, this paper holds, the invasion was a step in shoring up a deteriorating strategic position, a step whose potential rewards outweighed the risks. Whatever the reasons, the wider implications are seen as ominous.

THE SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN: METHODS, MOTIVES, AND RAMIFICATIONS

by

Captain Joseph J. Collins, U.S. Army

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has earned a unique place in contemporary history. It represented the first time since the end of World War II that Soviet ground forces engaged in combat outside the Warsaw Pact area. No longer limited to advisers and proxies, the Soviet military became directly involved in a Third World conflict. Furthermore, the Soviet invasion took place in a politically sensitive area and occurred during a period of unprecedented Soviet military strength, thus adding to Western fears concerning the future course of Soviet foreign policy. Finally, the Soviet invasion brought again into question the value and the future of a superpower détente.

The purpose of this article is to explore the methods and motives at work in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and to look at some of the ramifications of the invasion. This investigation takes place in the context of

limitations. First, the record of events is still incomplete and somewhat contradictory. Consequently, the findings must be considered as preliminary. Second, it is recognized that findings about Soviet intentions can never be totally objective. The subject of intentions is further complicated by the fact that new opportunities can produce new intentions. Third, the reader is reminded that we must examine Soviet perceptions in order to determine Soviet intentions. We must accept at the start that Soviet officials do not see the world with our eyes, and thus they will tend to believe things that Americans might dismiss as absurd, paranoid, or irrational.

Methods: The Background.

Afghanistan is a mountainous country about the size of the state of Texas. Subsistence agriculture is the principal

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mode of existence and this nation would fit into any definition of "under-developed." For example, only 12 percent of the land area of Afghanistan is cultivated; there are few paved roads and no railroads at all. Afghanistan's primary interest for students of international affairs is rooted in the fact that it borders on Iran, Pakistan, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.¹

Successive Soviet regimes have always taken a strong interest in Afghan affairs and, on the whole, relations between the two countries have been very cordial. Through the years, as Afghan governments became increasingly "progressive," Soviet economic aid increased, reaching the level of \$150 million per year during the second regime of Mohammad Daud (1973-78).² By 1975, however, Daud began to have second thoughts about "sleeping too close to the bear." Seeking a more nonaligned stance, Daud purged the army of its Soviet-trained leftists, came to terms with Pakistan over a boundary dispute, and even requested aid from the OPEC nations. Fearing further crackdowns from the autocratic Daud regime, the two pro-Moscow parties united in 1977, and with some help from segments of the armed forces and the Soviet KGB, they toppled the Daud regime in April 1978, killing the President in the process. The coup lasted 36 hours and as many as 2,000 Afghans died before it was over.³

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) that came to rule was dominated by the Khalq ("Masses") faction, mainly composed of urban intellectuals divorced from the realities of life in the countryside. The party boss Nur M. Taraki became President and, later on, his more radical deputy, Hafizullah Amin became Prime Minister. To preserve the remnants of Western aid and to avoid the stigma of atheism, the two leaders initially soft-

pedaled their communis sympathies. Simultaneously they attempted to consolidate their power by purging the Parcham ("Flag") faction of the party in July and by instituting a well meaning but disastrous land reform policy aimed at gaining support in the countryside.⁴ In spite of this effort, a full-scale revolt broke out in the countryside, spear-headed by the mountain tribes that identified the Taraki regime as anti-Islamic and a puppet of the Soviet Union. Out of necessity, the Taraki regime increasingly turned to Moscow for aid, and in December 1978 the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation.

The door to the West was firmly shut in February 1979 when the U.S. ambassador, Adolph Dubs, was taken hostage by fanatics and killed when the Soviet-advised Afghan police, over American objections, assaulted the Kabul hotel where the ambassador was being held captive. Not only did subsequent U.S. protests go unanswered, but the Afghan Foreign Minister even failed to participate in a memorial service for the slain ambassador.⁵

As 1979 progressed, the situation in Afghanistan went from bad to worse for Taraki. Domestic repression increased, with one estimate of slain political prisoners put at 20,000.⁶ Similarly, the Afghan Army did little to inspire loyalty in the countryside. For example, in April 1979 government troops massacred 640 men and boys as a reprisal for rebel activities around the city of Kherat.⁷ Despite these tough measures, resistance continued to increase. By September, the Soviets began to pressure Taraki to dismiss the ambitious Amin who previously had resisted changes to the government's draconian policies. However, when Amin was informed of his dismissal he did not leave quietly. A gun battle broke out in the Arg palace; and Taraki and his bodyguards were killed, leaving Amin in full control of the government.⁸

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Despite Soviet pressure, Amin refused to broaden the base of the ruling party or to adopt more moderate policies. Amin rejected offers of Soviet troops, and a member of his government even openly criticized the Soviets for interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, an especially embarrassing charge since this type of behavior was expressly forbidden by the friendship treaty. Shortly thereafter, Amin went so far as to demand the recall of the Soviet ambassador.⁹ When a Soviet-supervised military operation failed in November, the Soviet leadership apparently decided that if the "revolution" were to succeed, the incumbent government would have to be changed.

Methods: The Invasion. On 8 December lead elements of a brigade-sized Soviet airborne unit landed at the airbase at Bagram, north of Kabul. On the 20th, this unit moved to and cleared the Salang Pass of its rebel defenders, thus opening the highway from Tamerz in the Soviet Union to Kabul.¹⁰ This action was complemented by the callup of Soviet reservists to man the divisions then on the Afghan border.

Soviet diplomats were also busy around this time. Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin met with Secretary of State Vance to discuss the future prospects of U.S.-Soviet relations and shortly thereafter returned to the Soviet Union, apparently to brief the Politburo on any last minute developments in his area of responsibility. In Kabul, the Soviet ambassador repeatedly tried to get Amin to agree to accept their offer of Soviet combat troops to supplement the nearly 2,000 advisers already in country. Neither diplomat received any information that might have halted the next phase of the Soviet operation.

On Christmas Eve, despite the presence of an Afghan armored division nearby, the Soviets began landing

Kabul Airport. On 27 December, in an operation that produced "hundreds of casualties," troops from this division deployed to the Darulaman Palace outside Kabul, destroyed Amin's elite guard and their eight tanks, and killed President Amin.¹¹ Babrak Karmal, head of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, and then in exile somewhere in Eastern Europe, was proclaimed President. Later that same day senior Afghan Army officers including the general commanding the Central Army Corps, unwilling to cooperate with the Soviets, were killed by Soviet troops.¹² MVD Lieutenant General Viktor Paputin, the apparent commander of the early stages of the invasion, was also killed on the 27th, somewhere in the vicinity of Kabul.

Two days later two motorized rifle divisions, one destined for Kabul and the other for Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, led the procession of Soviet troops across the border. By the first week in February, seven Soviet divisions had been identified in Afghanistan.¹³

Soviet forces were quite methodical in the operations that followed. First they moved to consolidate their hold over major roads and urban areas. Second, divisions were then deployed to the Iranian and Pakistani borders in an attempt to limit infiltration from the sanctuary areas in these two countries. Third, concurrent with the first and second steps, disloyal elements of the Afghan Army were disarmed or, if they refused as the 26th Afghan Parachute Regiment did, they were destroyed by the superior firepower of adjacent Soviet units. Throughout the initial stages of the invasion, Soviet advisers played a key role in neutralizing Afghan Army units whose loyalty was questionable.¹⁴

The reaction of world opinion was swift and strong by diplomatic standards. The United States quickly announced economic sanctions and its

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intention to boycott the Olympics. This was followed by the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine, aimed at deterring further expansionist moves. In the United Nations, following a Soviet veto in the Security Council, the General Assembly soundly condemned the invasion 104 votes to 18, with 30 abstentions or absences. The most notable aspect of this vote was the sharp blow delivered by the nonaligned nations, more than two-thirds of which voted against the Soviets in the General Assembly.¹⁵

In summary, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan proved again that the Soviet leadership is capable of drastic actions to achieve policy goals under low-risk circumstances. As an instrument of that policy, the Soviet military proved that: (1) it is capable of effective mobilization, (2) it can perform major operations without severe logistical breakdown, (3) it has sufficient ground forces to mount major operations of daring scope outside the Warsaw Pact or Chinese border areas, and (4) it is reliable in "political" operations, such as assassination and disarming unreliable friendly forces.

The methods used by the Soviets in Afghanistan were similar to those used in their 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and in other operations in the Third World. Indeed, the ease with which the Soviets succeeded in Czechoslovakia may have made them overconfident in the case of Afghanistan. But Afghanistan also represented a new phase in Soviet operations in the Third World. Never before has Ivan let himself become so expensively and directly involved in a Third World conflict. Quite obviously, the Soviets perceived that the risks taken were more than justified by the rewards present.

Motives. Whatever the Soviet motives for invading Afghanistan were, they were hardly clarified by the

amateurish propaganda generated to support the invasion. The Soviet claim to having been "invited" was obviously false. Of the two men who could have invited them in, one was a powerless exile, and the other died resisting his guests. The rationale of "outside interference" by foreign agents was likewise transparent. It really stretches the imagination to believe President Karmal's claim that Amin was a "CIA agent," and it did nothing for Soviet credibility to proclaim Amin's overthrow via a fake Radio Kabul announcement that came from a radio transmitter inside the Soviet Union.¹⁶

Some Western analysts have also made assertions about the invasion that will not hold up under scrutiny. One such theory, put forth by George Kennan, speculates that the "moderate" Brezhnev was overruled on Afghanistan and that the invasion heralds the succession of or at least a strong initiative from a new, more militant Soviet leadership coalition.¹⁷ Not only has the ailing Brezhnev reemerged as of late, but in a demonstration of political strength he was able, just 1 month prior to the invasion, to install a longtime crony, Nikolai Tikhonov, as a full voting member of a Politburo, already packed with Brezhnev's other lifelong associates.¹⁸ If Brezhnev's subsequent support for the invasion has not convinced the doubtful, they might do well to remember that the Brezhnev regime is the same one that invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, did nothing to stop the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war in 1973, conducted a successful military operation in Angola in 1975, and armed *both* the attackers and the defenders in the Ethiopian-Somali war in 1978. This record gives one little reason to believe that Brezhnev would "make waves" over a military operation directed at a defenseless state on the Soviet border. In short, Brezhnev's ability to side with the majority in Politburo disputes has kept him in

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power for 16 years. The issue of Afghanistan provided no exception to this rule.¹⁹

The projected Soviet oil shortage also seems not to have provided an important rationale for the Soviet invasion. We give too much credit to the Soviet ability to control the future if we see their invasion as merely Phase I in their drive for Persian Gulf oil.²⁰ Henry Kissinger reminded President Nixon in 1969 that:

It is always tempting to arrange diverse Soviet moves into a grand design. The more esoteric brands of Kremlinology often purport to see each and every move as part of the carefully orchestrated score in which events inexorably move to the grand finale.

Experience has shown that this has rarely if ever been the case. From the Cuban missile crisis... to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, there has been a large element of improvisation in Soviet policy.²¹

If the Soviets were intent on moving into Iran via military means, their invasion of Afghanistan was a poor move from a tactical standpoint. The invasion drew attention to the area and made the West more aware than ever of the criticality of an independent Iran. This does not mean that the Soviets would let pass a more "graceful" opportunity to move into Iran, but it does seem to indicate that their motives for invading Afghanistan lay elsewhere.

Another argument that probably represented only a minor factor in the Soviet decisionmaking process was the one that sees the invasion as a simple effort to prevent Islamic fervor from spreading to the estimated 30 million Muslims in the Soviet Union.²² While the Soviet leaders may be concerned about this as a long-range problem, it did not concern them enough to prevent them from using reservists from the Central Asian republics to man the

initial attacking divisions. Furthermore, recent newspaper accounts indicate that the Soviet leadership has not experienced any problems over the invasion from their Muslim populations.²³

The most important reasons that the Soviets possessed for invading Afghanistan fall under two headings: geopolitics and commitment. Southwest Asia has always been a key geopolitical concern of the Soviet Union, not only because that area forms its southern border, but also because of its quest for an ocean access, and its more recent concern over the Suez-Indian Ocean-Pacific route to the Soviet Far East.²⁴ Unfortunately, from a Soviet point of view, the West was also strongly interested in the area, especially where Iran and Pakistan were concerned. After World War II and the Soviet withdrawal from Iran in 1946, an uneasy geopolitical status quo emerged. Iran became decidedly pro-Western, but it also maintained "correct" relations with the Soviets. Afghanistan was normally pro-Soviet, and Pakistan, although somewhat hostile to the Soviet Union, was checked by India. In retrospect, even superpower naval activity in the Indian Ocean, prior to the fall of the Shah, seems to have been relatively insignificant. Negotiations had even been proposed to demilitarize the entire area.

When the Shah of Iran fell in January 1979 and the Afghan insurgency against the Taraki regime heated up, the status quo quickly began to unravel. Iran became hostile to both superpowers, and it appeared as if an Islamic-based movement might topple the Afghan government. More significantly, U.S. Fleet deployments increased, and the Soviets believed that the United States would soon move to reestablish its "position of strength" in Iran. The Soviets had previously been able to live with a pro-Western Iran, but "losing" Afghanistan would now create a bigger problem. If not kept solidly in the Soviet

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camp, Afghanistan could possibly become the linchpin in a new NATO-Chinese encirclement of the Soviet Union. In Soviet eyes, the American fixation on Iran was simply a cover for grander purposes. As one Soviet analyst said:

U.S. ruling circles also hope to divert world attention from its dangerous action with respect to Iran, to justify the vast concentration of U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf area, and the Pentagon's efforts to set up new pro-western military groupings and alliances in Asia, spearheaded against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.²⁵

Soviet concern over a deteriorating strategic position was reinforced by its security commitment to Afghanistan. Article 4 of the friendship treaty states that both parties will "take appropriate measures with a view to ensuring the security, independence and territorial integrity of the two countries."²⁶ While this represents far less than an ironclad guarantee of Afghan security, one can imagine the great loss of prestige that the Soviets would face if a Marxist "revolution" on their own border were to fall to "reactionary forces." This commitment to Afghanistan was accentuated by previous "losses" such as Chile. Brezhnev himself remarked in a widely reprinted *Pravda* interview:

To act in any other way would mean to leave Afghanistan to be torn to pieces by imperialism, to allow aggressive forces to repeat here what they were able to do, for example, in Chile, where the freedom of the people was drowned in blood. To act in any other way would mean to look on passively as a center of serious threat to the security of the Soviet state arose on our southern frontier.²⁷

In calculating their plans for the invasion, the Soviets may have decided

that they had little to lose in the area of U.S.-Soviet relations. While many U.S. analysts saw the Soviet invasion as the first decisive battle of a new cold war, Soviet analysts found the origins in U.S. behavior prior to the crisis. The leading Soviet Americanologist, Georgi Arbatov, summed up the Soviet view in this manner:

It was before the events in Afghanistan that the U.S. took other steps: it froze the arms limitation talks, put into effect a policy of delaying the SALT II Treaty that amounts almost to its rejection, sharply heightened the pitch of anti-Soviet hysteria and accelerated rapprochement with Peking on an anti-Soviet basis.²⁸

In effect, the Soviets may have concluded that the United States and its allies (particularly after their recent decision on NATO nuclear modernization) could do little more to hurt the Soviet Union. It may also have occurred to them that Western furor over a rapid, successful invasion might dissipate quickly as it did after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. In any case, the Soviets believed that the potential rewards outweighed the risks in the case of Afghanistan.

Ramifications. Many scenarios could be drawn up for future developments in Afghanistan. Two seem highly unlikely to occur: a quick Soviet defeat, or a quick Soviet victory. To defeat the Soviets, the disunited rebel groups would have to come together, receive massive quantities of arms, destroy the Soviet divisions in the countryside, and then eject the remainder from the urban areas and the centers of communication. Nothing of this scale appears in the offing, and if it ever were to come to pass the 85,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, backed up by another 30,000 across the border, could easily handle the quasi-conventional operations which would ensue.

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For dissimilar reasons, a quick Soviet victory is also unlikely. Every additional increment of Soviet aid makes the Karmal government appear all-the-more the agent of the "foreign devils." Resistance continues to grow, not only in the countryside, but also on the campuses and in the cities. Furthermore, after a brief flirtation with the idea, the Soviet Government has now ruled out a compromise neutralization scheme that might make accommodation with the rebels more feasible.

On the military side of the policy equation, the Soviets have very little to rejoice over. The Afghan borders, especially the 1,000-mile stretch with Pakistan, are nearly impossible to seal off. Roads and airfields are scarce and crowded, and raising troop strength would create severe logistical problems. Command and control arrangements have not been loosened to encourage initiative and the Soviet Army has failed, for the most part, to modify conventional, European-oriented tactics to meet the unconventional situation posed by the scattered rebel forces and the rugged terrain. Finally, the remnants of the Afghan Army appear to be of little help to the Soviets. Massive defections continue to occur, and recent draft calls have failed.²⁹

Consequently, the scenario that seems most likely to unfold is one of prolonged stalemate. Incremental changes in tactics or leadership may take place, but there is no sign yet that the required policy changes in the military or the diplomatic realm are being carried out.³⁰ On the other hand, a Soviet stalemate in Afghanistan should not be cause for rejoicing in the West. Unlike the United States in Vietnam, the Soviets will not be subject to the time pressures of an impatient public opinion, prodded by an inquisitive press corps. In a very real sense, time, contiguity, determination and military power favor the Soviets in the conflict. Therefore, the United States and its

allies must remain alert to the danger that the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan poses for the delicate regional balance in Southwest Asia.

First, the Soviet Union is now in a better position than ever to exploit ethnic rivalries in the area. The Baluchi people, who occupy parts of three countries in the region, are presently receiving aid and advice from Soviet agents.³¹ Together with Kurdish separatists and strong leftist elements in Iran, the Baluchi could represent a grave threat to the territorial integrity or the independence of that state. Turbulent Pakistan might represent yet another target. Recognition of an independent Baluchistan inside of what is now southern Pakistan could also net the Soviets access to the Indian Ocean port of Gwadar.³²

Second, the possession of airfields around Kandahar and other areas in southern Afghanistan now puts unrefueled Soviet fighters in range of the critical Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Close air support would degrade the advantage that carriers could give the U.S. Navy in the event of an Indian Ocean conflict or confrontation.

Finally, a strong Soviet presence in Afghanistan could provide a basis for the Finlandization of the entire region. Without a strong and constant demonstration of U.S. support, the governments in the region could succumb bit by bit to the Soviet use of the tactics of "fear and seduction."³³

The continuance of Soviet operations in Afghanistan also has ominous implications for the general course of Soviet foreign policy. Previous successful operations in Angola and Ethiopia gave Soviet leaders confidence in Soviet logistical capabilities and generalship. Now, Afghanistan gives the Soviet military an opportunity to test new or untried equipment (like the improved BMP, AKS rifle and the *Hind* gunship) and to prove its mettle as a

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fighting force. Even a limited success in Afghanistan could further increase the Politburo's confidence in the Soviet Military Establishment and make them more prone to use force to solve future foreign policy problems.³⁴

The invasion of Afghanistan has also led to a change in doctrinal emphasis that highlights the danger of more frequent Soviet military operations. This doctrinal change appears to extend the "protective custody" of the Brezhnev Doctrine to all of the proclaimed Marxist states in the Third World, which would include South Yemen, Angola, and Ethiopia, among others. An unsigned article in the Soviet weekly *New Times* (*Novoye Vremya*) asked:

What is the internationalist solidarity of revolutionaries? Does it consist only of moral and diplomatic support...or also of material assistance, including military help...? The history of the revolutionary movement confirms the political legitimacy of this form of assistance and support. Such were the case...in Spain in the 1930s, and in China.... Today when there exists a system of socialist states, it would be simply ridiculous to question the right to such assistance.... To refuse to use the possibilities at the disposal of the socialist countries would signify virtually evading performance of the internationalist duty and returning the world to the times when imperialism could throttle at will any revolutionary movement.³⁵

In effect, the Soviets now have a more refined excuse for using force in areas of the Third World wherever the "correlation of forces" will permit them to do so.³⁶

Conclusions. As a result of its invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet

Union now casts an even larger shadow, not only over Southwest Asia, but also over other areas open to the use of Soviet military power. In an international system that remains largely bipolar, the United States alone can exert the countervailing power needed to limit Soviet ambitions. This task is made doubly difficult by the fact that many geographic areas essential to U.S. security interests, like the Persian Gulf, are contiguous or close to Soviet frontiers. Clearly, the United States must continue to develop conventional capabilities to project its power, especially into the oil-rich Middle East.

In summary, to Brzezinski's observation that power tempts policy,³⁷ we must add a corollary: impotence invites adventure. In that respect, future Soviet moves will, in large measure, be a function of U.S. policy. Former Secretary of State Kissinger summarized the current situation and our mission in the years ahead:

To expect the Soviet leaders to restrain themselves from exploiting circumstances they conceive to be favorable is to misread history. To foreclose Soviet opportunities is thus the essence of the West's responsibility. It is up to us to define the limits of Soviet aims.³⁸

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Captain Joseph Collins is an Instructor, Department of Social Sciences, at the U.S. Military Academy. He was educated at Fordham and Columbia Universities and is a doctoral candidate in political science at the

latter. He has served in line and staff positions in the 2nd Infantry Division and the 3d Armored Division in Korea and Germany and was an instructor at the U.S. Army Infantry School.

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